

# Managing Municipalities in Cyberspace: FEMICA and LACUM

**LearnLink**



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## NETWORKING

Political instability, civil unrest, poverty, environmental issues, social change, and population growth challenge effective management of municipalities in Central America. To strengthen local governance, two networking organizations have received USAID support: the Federation of Central American Municipalities (FEMICA) and the Latin American Center for Urban Managers (LACUM), both headquartered in Guatemala.

FEMICA and LACUM network with local public and private sector officials—a group with a variety of personalities

and interests that otherwise might have little contact—to share experiences and lessons about local governance and urban management. For their constituents, many of whom hold important government positions, FEMICA and LACUM enable interpersonal exchanges, networking, dialogue, and support for joint initiatives. While traditional face-to-face networking is the preferred mode of contact at FEMICA, some association members now have computers, and modern information and communication technology (IT) is enhancing personal networking as a means of exchanging information.

AED/LearnLink helps FEMICA and LACUM integrate functions such as email, listservs, and web site development into their networking portfolio. High profile members such as the International Union of Local Authorities for the Latin American Region (IULA-CELCADEL) already have well-developed web sites, and the majority of FEMICA members stand to benefit significantly from online networking opportunities. A persistent question without an easy answer is municipalities at the local level will gain access to online materials in light of the Latin American “digital divide.”

### PARTNERING

FEMICA is integrating IT into its operations and has welcomed AED/LearnLink's provision of training and technical assistance, national policy reform advocacy, and suggestions for ways of increasing citizen participation in local decision making. LearnLink's activities support FEMICA and LACUM's aim for improving the exchange of information on local government information and, especially the sharing of lessons learned about government management issues.

FEMICA's networks link with mostly national associations of municipalities for Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, plus IULA-CELCADEL, whose constituencies are mostly mayors or city managers. In contrast LACUM's constituency is regional and international organizations dealing with housing, urban services, and environmental issues.

Electronic networking among all these 1800 or so groups and individuals is useful in facilitating open exchange and dialogue. To strengthen their e-networking, both FEMICA and LACUM associations use listservs based on specific topics in their internal offices and among board members.



*Ribbon cutting at the inauguration, from left to right, Patricia Durán de Jager, FEMICA's Executive Director; Victor Hugo del Pozo, Mayor of Antigua, Guatemala; and Hugo Cifuentes, a prerepresentative from Hotel Casa Santo Domingo*

## FACILITATING RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

While FEMICA continues its ongoing dialogue on policy issues, LACUM, as a center of USAID's Regional Urban Development Office (RUDO), addresses more practical issues of government management. Over the past two years, AED/LearnLink has provided technical assistance to both organizations for increasing their capacity. With their many members, both FEMICA and LACUM may have a multiplier effect in disseminating information and exchanging experiences about municipal management.

To initially introduce IT to FEMICA, an organization that maintained traditional communication networks, LearnLink assisted FEMICA in upgrading its existing web site. This site ([www.femica.org.gt/](http://www.femica.org.gt/)) now offers updated information on the nature of FEMICA itself and on its members, regional programs, and noteworthy speeches. Also the site includes a gallery of photos, archives, and contact information, as well as encouragement to provide feedback on site information.

LearnLink plans is providing technical assistance to LACUM for building a web site similar to FEMICA's site and developing five modules on selected local government management topics.



**The benefits of IT for local governance:**

1. cost effectiveness
2. collaboration with many social actors
3. fostering of partnerships—local, regional, national, and/or global
4. sustainability
5. linkages with initiatives directing affecting the daily lives of people
6. lack of barriers of time and geographic location and office schedules.

LACUM identified and paired 10 key institutional partners to develop pilot local government modules for CD-ROM production. To format these modules for the Internet, LearnLink is partnering with [netassessment.org](http://netassessment.org) for course design. Since some of LACUM's partners are university centers that already offer classes in urban management, it is in LACUM's interest to produce modules as distance education alternatives for students, mid-level managers, and administrators.

In addition, as a first step early in this development project, AED/LearnLink

published a now-somewhat-dated manual of case studies on municipal management in Central America. This publication collated experiences highlighted in a conference sponsored in part by FEMICA: The Second Meeting on Municipal Training and Technical Assistance Facilitation held in Roatan, Honduras, March 4-6, 1999, which included presenters from LearnLink. This document identifies resources, practices, and plans as well as limitations, bottlenecks, and opportunities—especially for training of local government officials—and highlights applications for IT in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The conference also generated considerable, broad-based enthusiasm among participants for a Central American Comprehensive Databank on Technical Assistance and Local Government-based Development that could be instituted by FEMICA or any willing and able partner.

***TOOLS OF THE TRADE***

To improve local governance, this activity has pointed the way for multiple applications that enhance learning about best practices and provided short-term management training for interested FEMICA member organizations. Thus, FEMICA was able to produce its *Mochila Tecnica del Alcalde*—a Mayor's Technical Briefcase—which identifies



*A traditional information exchange among FEMICA members*

essential materials and priorities for urban government. Available as a CD-ROM, this material may be expanded into several subject-specific manuals for broader distribution among public agencies and private companies that manage essential urban services.

### ***BUILDING LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY WITH IT***

By facilitating and enabling good governance practices and processes, information and communication technologies are powerful tools at any level. Information technology was first used to automate a few national government services in the US, now very powerful computers at relatively low cost can provide multiple tools for organizing, managing, communicating, disseminating, and informing local citizens as well as local governments about best practices. Although many smaller local governments in Latin

America do not have access to electronic information and communication technologies, interest in acquiring IT is expected, the number of FEMICA and LACUM members that are online is slowly growing, and the complexity is expanding. For those online governments, the use of computers

- improves responsiveness, efficiency, and inclusiveness in government processes and services;
- decentralizes power and resources to the local government level;
- increases the reach of government information and services;
- increases the ease of public access, as the number of citizens familiar with IT grows;
- promotes transparency and accountability of government action;
- facilitates civic participation in public matters and decisions;
- improves networking between governments, within governments, and with civil society; and
- enables participation in global fora.

When communication and information flow improves, government works better. As more and more Internet sites focus on local government issues, IT become useful for facilitating learning among local governments, government-related organizations, and citizens. In addition, expanding access to these Internet sites reinforces the integration of IT in government processes.

When information is exchanged between municipalities, it reaches end users and/or intermediaries who disseminate this information to others. Government online users may transmit information to or exchange information with the general public, specialized groups, and a global Internet community.

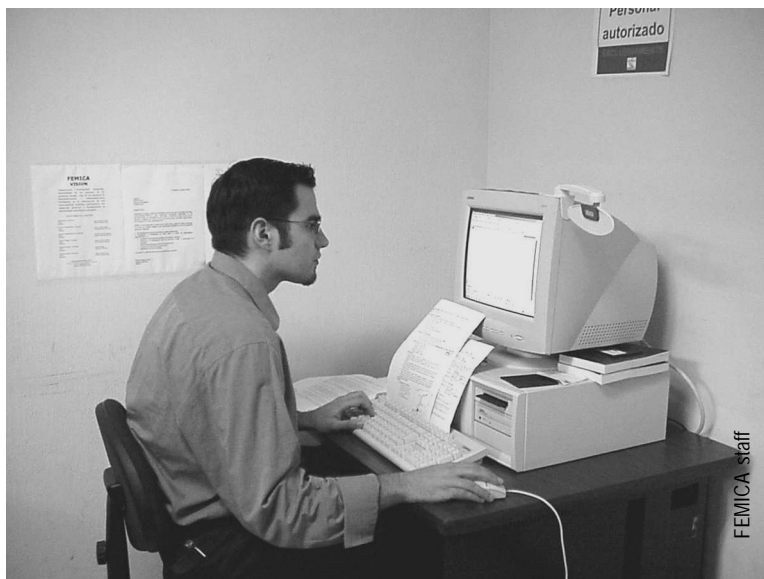
### CYBER PROSPECTS

With any new technology, there are hurdles to surmount. By themselves, web sites, connectivity, or IT options cannot ensure that people take advantage of these opportunities to the fullest extent possible. But with quality training programs, users can move from using multiple computer software packages for simple tasks to their application whatever the need is. Also, IT when used as a distance learning tool can build computer and substantive competency anywhere there is computer access. Nonetheless, it is difficult to estimate the reach in developing



*Analysts for FEMICA exchanging views about information in the Central American Archive*





*Javier Valdez, a Peace Corp volunteer, accessing information in the Central American Archive*

countries or the rate of growth of the inevitable spread of computer use by governments in Latin America.

Among the hurdles that new IT operations face, the lack of qualified personnel is number one. New technology calls for quality training. Other necessary preconditions are favorable communications rules and regulations, realistic assessments of needs and resources that must include queries about what is feasible, what is not, and

what is not appropriate for each local developing country government. As agents of change and frontrunners of modernization of governments, FEMICA and LACUM are taking initial steps into cyberspace with the potential to build capacity and good governance practices among their many government-oriented constituencies.